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THE TASK AND METHOD OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

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By "Systematic Theology" is meant that department or section of theological science which is concerned with setting forth systematically, that is to say, as a concatenated whole what is known concerning God. Other departments or sections of theological science undertake other tasks. Whether such a being as God exists needs to be ascertained, and if such a being exists, whether he is knowable; whether such creatures as men are capable of knowing him, and, if so, what sources of information concerning him are accessible. This is the task of apologetical theology. These matters being determined, it is necessary to draw out from the sources of information concerning God which are accessible to us, all that can be known of God. This is the task of exegetical theology. A critical survey of previous attempts to draw from the sources of information concerning God what may be known of God, with an estimate of the results of these attempts and of their testing in life, is next incumbent on us. This is the task of historical theology. Finally we must inquire into the use of this knowledge of God and the ways in which it may be best applied to human needs. This is the task of practical theology. Among these various departments or sections of theological science there is obviously place for, or rather there is positively demanded, yet another, the task of which is to set forth in systematic formulation the results of the investigations of exegetical theology, clarified and enforced by the investigations of historical theology, which are to be applied by practical theology to the needs of man. Here the warrant of systematic theology, its task, and its encyclopedic place are at once exhibited. It is the business of systematic theology to take the knowledge of God supplied to it by apologetical, exegetical, and historical theology, scrutinize it with a view to discovering the inner

relations of its several elements, and set it forth in a systematic presentation, that is to say, as an organic whole, so that it may be grasped and held in its entirety, in the due relation of its parts to one another and to the whole, and with a just distribution of emphasis among the several items of knowledge which combine to make up the totality of our knowledge of God.

It is clear at once that "systematic theology" forms the central, or perhaps we may better say the culminating, department of theological science. It is the goal to which apologetical, exegetical, and historical theology lead up; and it provides the matter which practical theology employs. What is most important in the knowledge of God—which is what theology is—is, of course, just the knowledge of God; and that is what systematic theology sets forth. Apologetical theology puts us in the way of obtaining knowledge of God. Exegetical theology gives us this knowledge in its *disjecta membra*. Historical theology makes us aware how it has been apprehended and transmuted into life. Practical theology teaches us how to propagate it in the world. It is systematic theology which spreads it before us in the form most accessible to our modes of conception, pours it, so to speak, into the molds of our minds, and makes it our assured possession that we may thoroughly understand and utilize it. There is nothing strange, therefore, in the common manner of speech by which systematic theology absorbs into itself all theology. In point of fact, theology, as the science of God, comes to itself only in systematic theology; and if we set systematic theology over against other theological disciplines as a separable department of theological science, this is not that we divide the knowledge of God up among these departments, retaining only some of it—perhaps a small or a relatively unimportant portion—for systematic theology; but only that we trace the process by which the knowledge of God is ascertained, clarified, and ordered, up through the several stages of the dealing of the human mind with it until at last, in systematic theology, it stands before our eyes in complete formulation.

The choice of the term "systematic theology" to designate this department of theological science has been made the occasion of some criticism, and its employment has been accompanied by some abuse. It is, no doubt, capable of being misunderstood and misused, as what

term is not? It ought to be unnecessary to explain that its employment is not intended to imply that other departments of theological science are prosecuted in an unsystematic manner, that is to say in a disorderly way and to no safe results. Nor ought it to be necessary to protest against advantage being taken of the breadth of the term "systematic," in its popular usage, to subsume under it a series of incongruous disciplines which have nothing in common except that they are all systematically pursued. What the term naturally designates is that department of theological science in which the knowledge of God is presented as a concatenated system of truth; and it is not merely the natural but the perfectly explicit and probably the best designation of this department of theological science. At all events none of its synonyms which have from time to time been in use—such as theoretical, thetical, methodical, scholastic, didactic, dogmatic theology—seems to possess any advantage over it.

The most commonly employed of these synonyms, since its introduction by Lucas Friedrich Reinhard in his *Synopsis theologicae dogmaticae*, 1660, has been "dogmatic theology." This designation differs from "systematic theology" by laying stress upon the authority which attaches to the several doctrines brought together in the presentation, rather than upon the presentation of them in a system. A dogma is, briefly, an established truth, authoritative and not to be disputed. The ground of its authoritativeness is indifferent to the term itself, and will vary with the point of view of the dogmatician. The Romanist will find it in the decrees of the church, by which the several dogmas are established. The Protestant will find it in the declarations of Scripture: *Verbum Dei*, say the Smalkald Articles, *condit articulos fidei, et praeterea nemo, ne angelus quidem*. "Moderns" will attenuate it into whatever general considerations exist to commend the propositions in question to our credit, and will not pause until they have transmuted dogmas into—to put it shortly—just our "religious beliefs." "A dogma," says Dr. A. J. Headlam, "means a truth to be believed"; and it is the task of dogmatics, according to him, "to investigate, to expound, and to systematize those truths about God and human destiny, whether derived from nature or revelation, which should be believed"—a definition which, if taken literally, might seem to imply that there are some "truths" about God and human destiny—

whether derived from nature or from revelation—which should not be believed. This ambiguity in the connotation of the term “dogma” is fatal to the usefulness of its derivative “dogmatic” as a designation of a department of theological science. It undertakes to tell us nothing of the department to which it is applied but the nature of the elements with which it deals; and it leaves us in uncertainty what the nature of these elements is, whether established truths or only “religious beliefs.”

“Systematic theology” is attended with no such drawbacks. It properly describes the department to which it is attached, according to its own nature: it is the department in which the truths concerning God, given to us by the other departments of theological science, are systematized and presented in their proper relations to one another and to the whole of which they form parts. The authority of the truths with which it deals does not constitute its peculiarity as a department of theological science. These truths were just as authoritative as presented by exegetical theology one by one to our separate consideration, as when presented by systematic theology to our view in their concatenation with one another into a consistent whole. Their authority was not bestowed on them by their systematization; and they do not wait until presented by systematic theology to acquire authority. What constitutes the peculiarity of this department of theological science is that in it these truths are presented not one by one in isolation, but in a mutually related body—in a system. What more truly descriptive name for it could be invented than just “Systematic Theology”?

There are some, no doubt, to whom it may seem presumptuous to attempt to systematize our knowledge of God. If we possess any knowledge of God at all, however, the attempt to systematize it is a necessity of the human spirit. If we know so much as two facts concerning God, the human mind is incapable of holding these facts apart; it must contemplate them in relation to one another. Systematization is only a part of the irrepressible effort of the intelligence to comprehend the facts presented to it, an effort which the intelligence can escape only by ceasing to be intelligence. It may systematize well, or ill; but systematize it must whenever it holds together, in its unitary grasp, more facts than one. Wherever God

is in any degree known by a being of a systematically working mind, therefore, there is a theology in the express sense of that word, that is, a "systematic theology." Only the atheist or the agnostic on the one side, the idiot or the lunatic on the other, can be without such a theology. If there is a God; if anything whatever is known of this God; if the being possessing this knowledge is capable of orderly thought—a theology in this sense is inevitable. It is but the reflection in the orderly working intelligence of God perceived as such; and it exists, therefore, wherever God is perceived and recognized. Doubt and hesitation before the task of systematizing our knowledge of God—be that knowledge great or small—is therefore not an effect of reverence, but an outgrowth of that agnostic temper which lurks behind much modern thinking.

The leaven of agnosticism underlying much of modern thought to which allusion has just been made, manifests itself more distinctly in the continuous attempt, which is more or less deliberately made, to shift the object of the knowledge which systematic theology systematizes from God to something else, deemed more capable of being really known by or more accessible to such beings as men. Theology, *ex vi verbi*, is the systematized knowledge of God; and if God exists and any knowledge of him whatever is accessible to us, there must be such a thing as a systematic knowledge of him, and it would seem that this would be the proper connotation of the term "theology." Nevertheless, we are repeatedly being told that theology is not the science of God, its object-matter being God in his existence and activities, but the science of religion or of faith, its object-matter being the religious phenomena manifested by humanity at large, or observable in the souls of believers. A whole generation of theologians, having the courage of their convictions, accordingly almost ceased to speak of "Systematic Theology," preferring some such name as the "science of faith" (*Glaubenslehre*). It was Schleiermacher, of course, who gave this subjective twist to what he still spoke of as "Dogmatics." Dogmas to him were no longer authoritative propositions concerning God, but "conceptions of the states of the Christian religious consciousness, set forth in formal statement"; and dogmatics was to him accordingly nothing more than the systematic presentation of the body of such dogmas in vogue in any

given church at any given time. Accordingly he classified it frankly, along with "Church Statistics," under the caption of "The Historical Knowledge of the Present Situation of the Church." Undoubtedly it is very desirable to know what the church at large, or any particular branch of the church, believes at any given stage of its development. But this helps us to a better knowledge of the church, not of God; and by what right the formulated results of such a historical inquiry can be called "dogmatics" or "systematic theology" *simpliciter* and not rather, historically, "the dogmatic system of the German Lutheran church in the year 1821," or "the doctrinal belief of the American Baptists of 1910," it would be difficult to explain. The matter is not in principle altered if the end set before us is to delineate, not the doctrinal beliefs of a particular church at a particular time, but the religious conceptions of humanity at large. We are still moving in the region of history, and the results of our researches will be that we shall know better, not God, but man—man in his religious nature and in the products of his religious activities. After all, the science of religion is something radically different from systematic theology. We cannot thus lightly renounce the knowledge of the most important object of knowledge in the whole compass of knowledge. Over against the world and all that is in the world, including man and all that is in man, and all that is the product of man's highest activities, intellectual and, in the noblest sense the word may bear, spiritual, there after all stands God; and he—he himself not our thought about him or our beliefs concerning him, but he himself—is the object of our highest knowledge. And to know him is not merely the highest exercise of the human intellect; it is the indispensable complement of the circle of human science, which, without the knowledge of God, is fatally incomplete. It was not without reason that Augustine renounced the knowledge of all else but God and the soul; and that Calvin declares the knowledge of God and ourselves the sum of all useful knowledge. Without the knowledge of God it is not too much to say we know nothing rightly, so that the renunciation of the knowledge of God carries with it renunciation of all right knowledge. It is this knowledge of God which is designated by the appropriate term "theology," and it, as the science of God, stands over against all other sciences, each

having its own object, determining for each its own peculiar subject-matter.

Theology being, thus, the systematized knowledge of God, the determining question which divides theologies concerns the sources from which this knowledge of God is derived. It may be agreed, indeed, that the sole source of all possible knowledge of God is revelation. God is a person; and a person is known only as he expresses himself, which is as much as to say only as he makes himself known, reveals himself. But this agreement is only formal. So soon as it is asked how God reveals himself, theology is set over against theology in ineradicable opposition. The hinge on which the controversy particularly turns is the question whether God has revealed himself only in works, or also in word: ultimately whether he has made himself known only in the natural or also in a supernatural revelation. Answer this question as we may, we shall still have a theology, but according to our answer, so will be our theology, not merely in its contents but in its very method. By revelation may be meant nothing more than the evolution of religious ideas in the age-long thinking of the race, conceived (whether pantheistically or more or less theistically) as the expression of the divine mind in the forms of human thought. In that case, the work of systematic theology follows the lines of the psychology and phenomenology of religion; its task is to gather out and to cast into a systematic statement the metaphysical implications of the results of these departments of investigation. Or revelation may be summed up in the impression made by the phenomenon of Jesus on the minds of his believing followers. Then, what theology has to do is to unfold the ideas of God which are involved in this experience. Or again revelation may be thought to lie in a series of extraordinary occurrences, conceived as redemptive acts on the part of God, inserted into the course of ordinary history. In that case the task of theology is to draw out the implications of this series of extraordinary events in their sequence, and in their culmination in the apparition of Christ. Or, once more, revelation may be held to include the direct communication of truth through chosen organs of the divine Spirit. Then, the fundamental task of theology becomes the ascertainment, formulation, and systematization of the truth thus communicated, and if this truth comes to it fixed in an

authoritative written record, it is obvious that its task is greatly facilitated. These are not questions raised by systematic theology; nor does it belong to systematic theology to determine them. That task has already been performed for it by the precedent department of theological science which we call apologetics, which thus determines the whole structure and contents of systematic theology. The task of systematic theology is not to validate the reality, or to define the nature, or to determine the method of revelation; nor, indeed, even to ascertain the truths communicated by revelation; but to systematize these truths when placed in its hands by the precedent disciplines of apologetical, exegetical, and historical theology.

The question of the sources of our knowledge of God culminates obviously in the question of the Scriptures. Do the Scriptures contain a special revelation of God; or are they merely a record of religious aspirations and attainments of men—under whatever (more or less) divine leading? Are they themselves the documented revelation of God to man; or do they merely contain the record of the effect on men of the revelation of God made in a series of redemptive acts culminating in Christ, or possibly made in Christ alone? Are the declarations of Scripture the authoritative revelations of God to us which need only to be understood to become items in our trustworthy knowledge of God; or are they merely human statements, conveying with more or less accuracy the impressions received by men in the presence of divine manifestations of more or less purity? On the answers which our apologetics gives to such questions as these, depend the entire method and contents of our systematic theology. Many voices are raised about us, declaring “the old view of the Scriptures” no longer tenable; meaning by this the view that recognizes them as the documented revelation of God and treats their declarations as the authoritative enunciations of truth. Nevertheless men have not commonly wished to break entirely with the Scriptures. In one way or another they have usually desired to see in them a record of divine revelation; and in one sense or another they have desired to find in them, if not the source, yet the norm, of the knowledge of God which they have sought to set forth in their theologies. This apparent deference to Scripture is, however, illusory. In point of fact, on a closer scrutiny of their actual procedure, it will be discovered that

"modern thinkers" in general really set aside Scripture altogether as source or even authoritative norm of our knowledge of God, and depend, according to their individual predilections, on reason, on Christian experience, corporate or personal, or on tradition, for all the truth concerning God which they will admit. The formal incorporation by them of Scripture among the sources of theology is merely a fashion of speech derived from the historical evolution of their "new" views and is indicatory only of the starting-point of their development. Their case is much the same as the Romanist's who still formally places Scripture at the base of his "rule of faith" in the complicated formula: Scripture plus tradition, as interpreted by the church, speaking through its infallible organ, the pope—while in point of fact it is just the pope, speaking *ex cathedra*, which constitutes the actual authority to which he bows.

A striking illustration of how men cling to such old phraseology after it has become obsolete to their actual thought may be derived from a recent writer whom we have already taken occasion to quote. Dr. A. C. Headlam, whose inheritance is Anglican while his critical point of view is "modern," really recognizes no source of theological beliefs (for with him dogmatics deals with beliefs, not truths) but tradition and the living voice of the church. Yet this is the way he describes the sources of his theology: "The continuous revelation of the Old Testament as accepted in the New, the revelation of Christ in the New Testament, the witness of Christian tradition, and the living voice of the Christian church." The statement is so far incomplete that it omits the revelation of "nature," for Dr. Headlam, allows that nature may teach us somewhat of its Maker: it includes the sources only of what Dr. Headlam would perhaps call "revealed theology." What is to be noted is that it avoids saying simply that these sources are Scripture, tradition, and the living voice of the church, as a Romanist might have said, reserving of course the right of further explanation of how these three sources stand related to one another. Dr. Headlam has gone too far with modern biblical criticism to accept the Scriptures as a direct source of dogma. He therefore frames wary forms of statement. He does not say "the Old Testament," or even "the continuous revelation of the Old Testament." He introduces a qualifying clause: "The continuous

revelation of the Old Testament as accepted in the New." This is not, however, to make the New Testament the authoritative norm of theological truth. Proceeding to speak of this New Testament, he does not say simply, "the New Testament"; or even "the revelation embodied in the New Testament." He restricts himself to: "The revelation of Christ in the New Testament." It is not, we see, the Old and New Testaments themselves he is thinking of; he does not accord authority to either of them as is done, for example, when they are spoken of in the old phrase, "God's Word written." His appeal to them is not as the documented revelation of God, nor even, as might be perhaps supposed at first sight, as the trustworthy record of such revelations as God has given; but simply as depositories, so far, of Christian beliefs. The Scriptures, in a word, are of value to him only as witness to Christian tradition. He says explicitly: "The Scriptures are simply a part of the Christian tradition"; and he is at pains to show that Christianity, having antedated the New Testament, cannot be derived from it but must rather be just reflected in it. He does not even look upon the Scriptures as a trustworthy depository of Christian tradition. The tradition which they preserve for us is declared to be both incomplete and distorted. They cannot serve therefore even as a test of tradition; contrariwise, tradition is the norm of Scripture and its correction is needed to enable us safely to draw from Scripture. "It is tradition," we read, "which gives us the true proportions of apostolic teaching and practice," by which the one-sidedness of the Scriptural record is rectified. If, then, Dr. Headlam's view of the sources of dogmatics were stated with succinct clearness, undeflected by modes of speech which have become outworn to him, we should have to say that these sources are just "tradition" and "the voice of the living church." Scripture is to him merely an untrustworthy vehicle of tradition.

Dr. Headlam is an Anglican, and when the authority of Scripture dissolves in his hands, he drops back naturally on "the church," —its "tradition," its "living voice." Others, born under different skies, have only the authority of the Christian's own spirit to fall back on, whether as a rationally thinking entity, or as a faith-enlightened soul. A mighty effort is indeed made to escape from the individualistic subjectivism of this point of view; but with indifferent

success. It is not, however, to the Scriptures that appeal is made in this interest. Rather is it common with this whole school of writers that it is not the Scriptures but "the gospel" which supplies the norm by which the faith of the individual is regulated, or the source from which it derives its positive content. This "gospel" may be spoken of indeed, as "the essential content and the inspiring soul of the Holy Scriptures." But this does not mean that whatever we may find written in the Scriptures enters into this "gospel," but rather that of all which stands written in the Scriptures only that which we esteem the "gospel" has religious significance and therefore theological value. What this "gospel" is, therefore, is not objectively but subjectively determined. Sometimes it is frankly declared to be just that element in Scripture which awakens our souls to life; sometimes more frankly still it is affirmed to be only what in Scripture approves itself to our Christian judgment. "What is a proper function of a Christian man" demands an American writer not without heat, "if not to know a Christian truth when he sees it?"—just Paul's question turned topsy-turvy, since Paul would draw the inference that whoever did not recognize his words as the commandments of God was therefore no Christian man. Sometimes, with an effort to attain a greater show of objectivity, the "gospel" is said to include all that measures up to the revelation of God in Christ. But the trouble is that the Christ which is thus made the touchstone is himself a subjective creation. He is not the Christ of the gospel narrative, as he stands out upon the pages of the evangelists; for even in its portraiture of Jesus the Scriptures are held untrustworthy. The Jesus by which we would try Scripture is rather a reflection back upon the page of Scripture of what we conceive the revelation of God in Christ ought to be. When our very touchstone is thus a subjective creation, it is easy to estimate how much real objective authority belongs to the Scriptural revelation determined by it. One of the most interesting, and certainly one of the most strenuous attempts to preserve for Scripture a certain recognition in theological construction from this point of view is supplied by Julius Kaftan. Kaftan is emphatic and insistent that the faith-knowledge which, according to him, constitutes the substance of dogmatics, takes hold upon objective realities which are matters of revelation and that

this revelation is recorded in the Scriptures. But unfortunately he is equally emphatic and insistent that this "revelation" witnessed by the Scriptures is not a communication of truths, but a series of occurrences, testified to as such, indeed, by the Scriptures (when historicocritically dealt with), but by no means authoritatively, or even trustworthily interpreted by the Scriptures. And therefore it is utilizable for the purposes of dogmatics only as it is taken up by "faith" and transmuted by faith into knowledge; which is as much as to say that faith may, indeed, be quickened by Scripture, but the material which is to be built into our dogmatics is not what Scripture teaches but what we believe. "Dogmatics," we are told explicitly, "derives none of its propositions directly from the Scriptures; . . . what mediates for Dogmatics between the Scriptures and the dogmatic propositions, is faith." "The dogma of which Dogmatics treats is the dogma that is recognized by the community." All of which, it would seem, would be more clearly expressed, if it were simply said that the source of dogmatics is not Scripture but faith—the faith of the community.

This is not the place to vindicate the objective authority of Scripture as the documented revelation of God. That is the task of apologetics. What we are now seeking to make clear, is only that, as there are apologetics and apologetics, so there are, following them, systematic theologies and systematic theologies. Systematic theology, as the presentation of the knowledge of God in systematized form, can build only with the materials which the precedent departments of theological science give it and only after a fashion consonant with the nature of these materials. If our apologetics has convinced us that we have no other knowledge of God but that given us by a rational contemplation of the world, recognized as the work of his hands; or that given us by an analysis of the convictions which form themselves in hearts fixed on him—our procedure will take shape from the character of our sources and the modes by which knowledge of God is elicited from them. But equally if our apologetics assures us that God not only manifests himself in his works, and moves in the hearts which turn to him in faith, but has redemptively intervened in the historical development of the race (without this redemptive intervention lost in sin), and that not merely in acts but in words, and has

fixed the record of this intervention in authoritative Scriptures, our whole procedure in systematizing the knowledge of God thus conveyed to us will be determined by the character of the sources on which we depend. Taking from the hands of apologetics the natural knowledge of God which its critical survey of the results of human science brings us, and from the hands of biblical theology the supernaturally revealed knowledge of God which its survey of the historical process of revelation yields us, and viewing all in the light of the progressive assimilation of the body of knowledge of God by his people, through twenty centuries of thinking, and feeling, and living—systematic theology essays to cast the whole into a systematic formulation, conformed to the laws of thought and consonant with the modes of conception proper to the human intelligence.

Systematic theology is thus, in essence, an attempt to reflect in the mirror of the human consciousness the God who reveals himself in his works and word, and as he has revealed himself. It finds its whole substance in the revelation which we suppose God to have made of himself; and as we differ as to the revelation which we suppose God to have made, so will our systematic theologies differ in their substance. Its form is given it by the greater or less perfection of the reflection of this revelation in our consciousness. It is not imagined, of course, that this reflection can be perfect in any individual consciousness. It is the people of God at large who are really the subject of that knowledge of God which systematic theology seeks to set forth. Nor is it imagined that even in the people of God at large, in their present imperfect condition, oppressed by the sin of the world of which they still form a part, the image of God can be reflected back to him in its perfection. Only the pure in heart can see God; and who, even of his redeemed saints, are in this life really pure in heart? Meanwhile God is framing the knowledge of himself in the hearts of his people; and, as each one of them seeks to give expression in the forms best adapted to human consciousness, to the knowledge of God he has received, a better and fuller reflection of the revealed God is continually growing up. Systematic theology is therefore a progressive science. It will be perfected only in the minds and hearts of the perfected saints who at the end, being at last like God, shall see him as he is. Then, the God who has revealed

himself to his people shall be known by them in all the fulness of his revelation of himself. Now we know in part; but when that which is perfect is come that which is in part shall be done away.

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It is a well-known fact that the term "systematic theology" evokes an unfavorable response from many cultivated people today. They think of theology as an artificial product of a more or less perverse ingenuity, overlaying simple truths with elaborate speculation and substituting metaphysical refinement or traditional dogma for the fundamental experiences of the soul. It must be confessed that there is some excuse for this attitude. Like all special studies, theology tends to become technical. It has its peculiar phraseology and its inherited habits. And its representatives, as is the case with all those who follow well-trodden paths, tend to become pedantic and self-satisfied. Yet, in itself there is nothing in the subject-matter of theology which is specially abstruse or recondite. It deals with very simple and familiar experiences, and the questions which it attempts to answer present themselves sooner or later to the mind of most intelligent persons. I do not know how I can better introduce the subject of this paper, which is the task and problems of theology, than by trying to state in simple and untechnical language what these questions are.

All thought concerns itself with three kinds of questions: what things are, what they are for, and how they came to be. The first is the question of definition; the second is the question of value; the third is the question of cause. Theology attempts to answer these questions in connection with religion. It asks, in the first place, What is the nature of the religious experience, or in the case of Christianity, which particularly interests us as Christians, of the Christian experience? It asks, in the second place, What is the significance of this experience? What difference does it make to the individual and to society whether a man be a Christian or not? It asks, finally, What is the ultimate explanation of the Christian life and of the great conceptions with which it deals and whose reality it assumes? Are

they simply ideas which have naturally arisen in the course of human development, or are there realities which correspond to them? Does God really exist and is he such a being as Christianity assumes him to be? These are the three questions of theology. To answer them is its task. Its problems are such as arise naturally in the course of this attempt.

Theology in every age has dealt with these three questions. It has been concerned with the definition of Christianity, with its meaning, and with its explanation, but the questions have not always held the same relative prominence, because the changing social and intellectual environment has brought now one and now another into the center of interest.

The changing environment, then, is another factor which we must take into account when we try to define the task and the problems of theology. For, while it does not alter the task, it affects the problems. It concentrates attention upon questions which hitherto had lain below the horizon of interest, and so alters the proportion of treatment and gives the whole structure of thought a new elevation and perspective.

Let me illustrate this in the case of modern theology. Modern theology, as is well known, is concerned largely with critical and historical questions. It discusses the authorship of the biblical books, the origin and changes of Christian dogma, the history of the Christian church, and the growth of its institutions, customs, and traditions. Relatively little attention is given to metaphysical questions. In contrast to the older theology, with its massive structure, its systematic method and its relatively stable outline, modern theology seems to the casual observer fluctuating, erratic, uncertain. What does the change mean?

It means simply that we are witnessing one of these shifting of interest, of which I have spoken. A new problem has been brought into the center of attention, namely, the problem of definition. Modern theology is primarily concerned with finding out what Christianity is as an actual fact of human experience and, for the time being, this interest has thrust into the background the other questions which have engaged the theology of the past—the question of value and the question of explanation.

The reason for this change of emphasis is very simple. The old theology took it for granted that it knew what Christianity was. It identified it with its own particular type of doctrine and of experience. To the Roman Catholic Christianity was Catholicism; to the Calvinist, it was Calvinism; to the Arminian, Arminianism; and so on all along the line. To define Christianity it was only necessary to set forth systematically the doctrines and the practices of that special group of Christians to which the writer belonged. Problems of definition there were, no doubt, to be solved. The Roman Catholic was often confronted with the conflict of tradition, and the Protestant faced differences of interpretation in his study of the Scripture. But the problems were relatively simple and the method of their solution was admitted by all. The range of variation was confined within a narrow limit and, so far as other views were considered at all, it was simply for purposes of contrast and of controversy.

Such an attitude is no longer possible today, and this for two reasons. In the first place, we have a better acquaintance with the facts, and in the second place, we have a more accurate method of dealing with them. The world has grown smaller, and closer contact has cleared away many misunderstandings and prejudices. We know more about our fellow-Christians than we did, and, as we have come to know them better, we have learned to respect them more. Moreover, modern science has substituted for the rough and ready method of comparison, which used to be thought sufficient, a more accurate method of estimate. We call this method the comparative method. It is the method which approaches all phenomena without prejudice, placing them side by side for the purpose of discovering their similarities and their differences, in order that we may draw trustworthy conclusions as to their origin and meaning. This method, long fruitfully applied in other fields of human knowledge, has now been employed in the sphere of religion. The result has been to make necessary a revision of many opinions hitherto regarded as axiomatic. The contrast between the different forms of so-called Christianity is now seen to be less abrupt and unqualified than the advocates of each have assumed. The Protestant is ready to admit today that Catholicism is not all evil, nor Protestantism all good. Each has had a complex history and includes diverse elements.

Before we can define Christianity intelligently we must master this history and know which of the various and often conflicting elements which claim the name of Christian are really entitled to it.

This task of comparison and critical estimate has been undertaken by a series of special sciences which have gradually been differentiated from theology, as the necessity of specialization has become apparent. Biblical introduction investigates the origin and authorship of the different biblical writings; biblical theology analyzes the teachings of the several books and retraces their history and compares their contents. The history of doctrine and symbolics apply the same methods to the study of the later developments of doctrine and of creed. Systematic theology, dependent upon these special studies for its results, has been powerfully affected by them in its method, and a discussion of the preliminary questions as to the nature, sources, and tests of the Christian gospel occupy a space in modern systematic treatises altogether disproportionate to that assigned them in the past.

Nor is this comparative method applied to the phenomena of Christianity alone. Christianity, as we now see, is but one of a family of religions, all of them alike expressions of a religious instinct which is natural to man. The science of comparative religion studies these religions in their relations one to another and to Christianity, and shows in detail the points of similarity and of difference. The result of the study has been to show that many phenomena, hitherto thought distinctive of Christianity, are to be found in other religions as well, and renders the problem of defining its essential features at once more important and more difficult. The doctrine of the resurrection, for example, is found in the religion of Persia. Educated Hindus find themselves at home in the Johannine doctrine of the Logos, and declare that it is only a restatement in other words of ideas familiar to their own religion. The God of the Mohammedans is spirit and is addressed by his worshipers in prayer that, in its reverence, simplicity, and sincerity, has much in common with that of Christians.

Moreover, these religions are not isolated phenomena. They have touched each other at various points in the history of mankind, and Christianity itself has not been unaffected by the contact. Ritschl and his followers have pointed out how much early Christian theology

owes in its doctrinal formulation to the influence of Greece. More recent scholars have called attention to similar, if less direct, influences from Persia as well as from Assyria and Babylonia. As a result of these studies a new school has arisen, the so-called school of the history of religion, which applies this comparative method to the study of the Christian origins with a view to determining in a more scientific manner what is the real nature of Christianity and what its distinctive contribution to the religious life of man.

The answers which are given to this question by modern theologians fall into two main classes. According to the first, Christianity is a syncretistic religion, that is to say, a religion which consists of a combination of elements taken over from a number of different sources; as for example, the cosmogony of Babylonia, the eschatology of Persia, the monotheism of Israel, the metaphysics of Greece, the mysticism of the East. Its originality consists not so much in any particular element which it contains as in the manner in which it combines the best and the highest features of all the different religions. Its claim to universality rests upon its manifoldness, its ability to offer to each type of human need that which it craves.

According to the other and, on the whole, the more common answer, Christianity is a distinctive religion, because in the person of its founder it presents mankind with a unique character. In Jesus of Nazareth we find a personality unparalleled among men, and, as a result of his teaching and influence, there has been produced among his followers a type of experience and an ethical ideal which differentiate them from the adherents of any other religion. It is true, as the advocates of the other theory maintain, that many different streams pour their waters into the broad river we call Christianity. But no one of these influences, nor all combined, would be sufficient to account for Christianity as we know it, however much their presence may help to explain certain aspects of its history, which would otherwise perplex us. It is only when we touch the personality of Jesus of Nazareth that we reach the distinctive feature of Christianity and gain the norm by which its true nature may be judged.

This revision of earlier definitions has its effects upon the problem of values. The older theology, as we have seen, dealt in exaggerated

contrasts. It painted its picture in black and white and had no place for the intermediate colors. Christianity was contrasted as a purely supernatural religion with all other religions as natural, and the difference between the two was that between the infinite and the finite, the temporal and the eternal. As the one trustworthy revelation of the infinite God to a world otherwise destitute and depraved, the importance of the Christian religion was apparent on the surface. If, as was generally admitted, Christianity alone was able to guarantee eternal salvation, its value was so obvious as to need no defense. But the discovery of the new relations, of which I have spoken, renders this sweeping contrast untenable. Values hitherto unsuspected are found outside of Christianity, and within Christianity itself it becomes necessary to distinguish differences of value. Paul and Isaiah stand above the Chronicler, and Jesus towers above both. So the question is forced home upon us anew, what special contribution Christianity has to make to the life of man, which justifies its claim to uniqueness and supremacy. The same causes, therefore, which have led to a new definition of Christianity require a new estimate of its value.

This is the meaning of the Ritschlian movement, of which so much has been heard in recent times. The Ritschlian theology is the attempt, on the basis of modern critical study, to re-establish the supremacy of the Christian religion by pointing out in detail those qualities in it which give it permanent value for human life. Abandoning the *a priori* method of the older theology, with its appeal to supernatural revelation, Ritschl takes his departure from the Christian experience as an admitted fact. This experience he shows us is an experience of deliverance from bondage and fear through the contact of the soul with the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ. It is further the means of the transformation of human society through the new ethical life imparted to mankind by its acceptance of Jesus' gospel of the kingdom of God. In the person and work of Jesus, so Ritschl contends, we have to do with a phenomenon which is unique, and the proof that Christianity is really what its advocates have claimed it to be, namely, the final and perfect religion for man, is to be found in the effects which it produces and has ever produced in the lives of those who approach it in simplicity and faith.

On the basis of this fundamental estimate of value Ritschl takes up in detail the specific ideas with which the older theology deals, and tries to assign them their proper place and meaning. God, to Ritschl, is not primarily the absolute, of which we can know nothing in experience, but the living power revealed in Jesus Christ, which actually works our deliverance from bondage into liberty. Sin is that form of narrow and self-centered living which is characteristic of those who have not come under the influence of Jesus and made his social gospel the law of their life. Salvation is deliverance from bondage into liberty, from selfishness to service, and Jesus is the Savior because, as a matter of fact, he is the one through whom alone this deliverance comes. The unique place assigned to the Bible in the literature of the world is justified because it is the book which gives us Jesus, and so makes possible the experience of salvation through him. The church is the company of those who have been touched by his spirit and labor for his ends.

This reinterpretation of the older theological terms on the basis of the new standard of values is not confined to Protestantism. It is the meaning of that most interesting movement in the Catholic church which we call modernism. The modernists, like the Ritschlians, claim to hold the essentials of the older faith, but they seek to justify them in a new way. Instead of opposing the modern critical methods which have led to the reconstruction of Christian history, they welcome them as allies. They are ready to admit that dogma has had its development, and the church its evolution, but they claim that the final outcome of both alike is justified by its effects. The Catholic church is to them none the less divine because it has had a history. The proof of its unique authority is not the fact that it has never changed, but that through all its many changes it has continued to meet the needs of the human heart as no other institution has done, and is today the most effective means of God's self-revelation to man. By this method of appeal modern Catholics hope to commend Catholicism to many who have hitherto held aloof from it.

The question of value leads inevitably to the question of cause. When we have shown what a transformation Christianity has produced in the life of man and what a service it has rendered him, the question still remains, how we shall account for these facts. How

came it that Jesus' personality has produced so incomparable an effect? What is his relation to God, and God's to him? The attempt to answer this question plunges us at once into all the problems of metaphysical theology, for metaphysical theology deals with the nature of ultimate reality and endeavors to define the causes in which the Christian experience and salvation have their final spring.

But here we meet with the opposition of the pragmatists. A pragmatist is a man who finds the meaning of things exhausted in their effects, and who substitutes the category of end for that of cause. How things may have originated he does not know, nor much care. His chief concern is with their effects upon life today, and with their promise for the future; and, since the nature of that future is, in part, hidden, and can only be apprehended by the venture of faith, he determines to cast in his lot with the values that seem to him highest, and to believe that what is worthful will prove itself also real. This faith-philosophy, if we may venture so to describe it, has had a widespread influence upon Christian theology, and we find theologians dismissing as irrelevant, if not as positively confusing, many of the concepts on which the divines of the past have expended their energies. Thus, for example, the whole series of ideas which expresses the causal relation of God to the universe, such as that of creation, miracle, and the like, is discarded as unnecessary. The older rationalistic arguments, such as the cosmological and the teleological, are abandoned as inconclusive, and the idea of the absolute itself—the ultimate category of causality—banished as an unreal abstraction without contact with, or contribution to, the world of our present existence.

One may have great sympathy with this effort to simplify theology, and yet question whether simplification may not be carried too far. Different as are the interests which attach to the concept of value and of cause, they are yet closely related, and it will be found, upon examination, that theology can dispense with neither. For my ordinary living indeed I may neglect the causal question and content myself with the experience of values, but, none the less, this question has practical consequences of momentous import, and sooner or later I shall be forced to deal with it. For, on my answer to the causal question depends, in the last analysis, my confidence in the permanence of values, and this is a matter of the highest consequence to us all.

The world in which we live today presents us with values which are real indeed, but they are transient. How can we be sure that they will endure? Only as we are persuaded that they are grounded in some permanent reality which forms part and parcel of the structure of the universe itself. What the universe means for me depends, in the last analysis, upon what it is in itself. But the effort to discover the deepest structure of the universe is the effort to solve the causal question, the question of origins with which, in the nature of the case, that of outcome is indissolubly associated.

So we are led back at last, as all clear thinking must inevitably lead, to the final question of philosophy. What is the nature of ultimate reality, and what is our ground for confidence that the highest values will persist? To this question Christian theology has had a clear and definite answer. The ultimate reality is the Christian God, and on his control of the universe is grounded our confidence that the values which that universe now reveals will abide to the end.

All that this means I cannot here unfold. It leads us into deep waters and forces us to consider sooner or later all the greater questions with which the mind of man has wrestled since thought began. Here I am simply concerned to show that this wrestling is inevitable. Metaphysical theology, much as it has been maligned, is not a creation of idle curiosity, but the attempt of the human intellect to answer in terms natural to the changing intellectual environment questions which the needs of the human heart require it to put. If the answers given by the older theologians seem to us today unsatisfactory it is not because they are metaphysical, but because we have come to hold a different philosophy. They thought to establish the supreme value of Christianity by proving a unique cause. We rise to our faith in the existence of a unique cause through the experience of a supreme value. In this respect we stand on the same footing as contemporary science and philosophy. Each reasons from the known to the unknown and bases its ultimate conviction in the existence of a rational cause upon the necessities of its own thought. But belief in the existence of such a cause there must be if the values of life are permanently to be maintained. We too make our venture of faith. We believe that the world is controlled by the Father of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and is being guided by him to that

ideal of social brotherhood which Christ has revealed. It is the task of Christian theology to set forth in detail what this faith implies, and the arguments which it uses are simply its way of calling attention to the facts which give rise to this faith and which we believe will ultimately justify this confidence.

These, then, are the three questions of Christian theology, the question of definition, the question of value, and the question of cause. They are the questions of universal philosophy in their application to religion, and they are the questions of philosophy because they are the ultimate questions of life.

But we have not completely exhausted the problems of Christian theology when we have defined the questions which it asks. A word must also be said of the spirit in which it asks them. Much as theology has in common with philosophy, there is a difference in its method of approach which distinguishes its task. This difference grows out of its relation to the Christian church, and of this relation and its consequences I must say a single word in conclusion.

Considered on the intellectual side, theology is simply a branch of philosophy. It is the philosophy of religion, and Christian theology is the philosophy of the Christian religion. But theology, as taught in our seminaries today has practical aims as well. It is the servant of the Christian church and seeks to promote its efficiency by clarifying the thought of its members and giving definiteness to their action. Necessarily therefore it must add to its scientific interest as a discoverer of truth that of teacher and interpreter.

This task, in turn, has two aspects. On the one hand, the Christian theologian is concerned with the interpretation of the past. As he enters into the inheritance of earlier generations he finds that they have explained their faith in the language of their own time, using words and, what is still more important, ideas which have lost their meaning for our own day. Yet, these ideas are inwrought into the language of the devotional life. They meet us in our hymns and our liturgies, in our creeds and our sacraments. It is the work of the theologian to find the living Christian content in these old terms and to translate them into the language of today. On the other hand, there are many whom we know who have altogether lost touch with the organized church. Their spiritual life flows in other channels

and finds expression through other vehicles. Yet, at heart they are in sympathy with the principles of Jesus and need the fellowship and help of those who are living the Christian life. It is the theologian's function to interpret the Christian message to this class also by stating its contents in language which they can understand.

It is not easy so to state the Christian gospel as at once to preserve its continuity with the past and its living touch with the present. Yet, difficult as it is, it must be done, and the office of Christian theology is not fully accomplished until it has fulfilled this double task. In this respect the theologian performs the same service for the Christian church that the road-builder does in a modern army. It is his duty not only to find the best path, but to clear away the obstacles which impede progress when it is found. No doubt, religion would still exist even if there were no theology. The soul would find its way to God even if there were no path to point the way. But the journey would be less direct and more painful, and the rate of progress would be slower. When the road has been built many men can move abreast through a country where a single man could with difficulty find his way before. The theologian is the road-builder of the church, and upon the success with which he does his work the rate of Christian progress depends.

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The development of the various sciences upon which systematic theology is more or less directly dependent has brought keenly into consciousness a discrepancy between the method by which religious convictions have been justified and expounded in the past and the methods which are now familiar in other branches of learning. A theology which continues to employ an outgrown form of statement loses its power to interest or convince men who think in terms of the inductive sciences or who judge all human efforts by the standards of efficiency current in business life. Thus a "theological" sermon is often assumed to be concerned with abstruse matters of little concern to any save the academic specialist. The word "dogmatic" has acquired an evil connotation, so that a professor of "dogmatic the-

ology" seems out of place in a world where investigation, rather than dogmatism, promises the advance of human welfare. Upon the theologian today, therefore, is laid the task of discovering and formulating a method which shall serve to correlate his own branch of learning with the other branches. Whereas in former times the principal theological controversies were concerned with the content of belief, the chief interest now centers in the definition of the task.

In the brief space allotted, it will manifestly be impossible to enter into a detailed discussion of the problems connected with the formulation of a system of doctrine. We can only indicate in the most general terms what is the nature of the task confronting the theologian today, and suggest how he is to use the material at his disposal to accomplish his task.

The method which has prevailed in Protestant theology was inherited from the days of the ecclesiastical control of all sciences. Astronomy, geology, political science, psychology, philosophy were all expected to justify their conclusions by the appeal to biblical sanction. Gradually, however, this ecclesiastical control has been eliminated until today sciences have adopted the inductive method, finding both the material for study and the test of theory in analysis of the facts rather than in discussion of authoritative doctrines in books. This inductive ideal has also made its way into theological scholarship, so far as the historical branches are concerned. The biblical scholar in expounding the literature and history with which he is concerned employs precisely the same methods as are current in the exposition of secular literature and history. The result is that men trained in modern scientific ideals and employing modern processes of biblical scholarship can no longer be satisfied with a systematic theology which employs a method everywhere else discarded. In response to this dissatisfaction we see a frequent abandonment of the formal type of treatise with which the world has long been familiar. In the place of these older systems have come more informal expositions among which the textbooks of William Newton Clarke and William Adams Brown furnish conspicuously successful examples.

But the abandonment of the older method brings into the forefront of theological scholarship certain fundamental questions. If, as Professor Clarke says, theology is to obtain its material "any-

where,"¹ the theologian is brought face to face with so overwhelming a variety of data that it becomes difficult accurately to define his task. When the elements of a theological system could be drawn from so definitely circumscribed a literature as the Bible, the procedure was comparatively simple. But if the world lies open to the investigations of the theologian, one may well be modest about summarizing the religious truths which may be derived from so vast and varied a source. How shall the facts with which theology deals be identified and differentiated?

Since the days of Schleiermacher, it has come to be almost an axiom that the theologian is to deal with those valuations of human experience which may properly be termed religious. Theology thus comes to be the systematic presentation of our fundamental religious convictions. A disciple of Schleiermacher declared that the theologian had only to look within himself for the material with which he was to deal. But further reflection showed that experience cannot be taken simply as a storehouse from which permanent conclusions may be drawn. Experience has a history; it is conditioned by historical circumstances; it varies with changing environment. Consequently the effort has been made to attach *Christian* experience to some anchorage which shall preserve the element of finality to its utterances, and thus give to theology a definite realm which may be expounded with authority. Frank and his followers have attempted to make a distinction between the "natural" man and the "regenerate" man. It is affirmed that through the experience of Christian regeneration a man becomes a new "Ego" with new convictions and insights. These convictions may be systematically expounded; the branch of scholarship which thus expounds them is Christian theology. Systematic theology is thus believed to have a definite field which is worked by no other science. The Ritschlian school has adopted a more objective method of marking off the section of experience with which the theologian must deal. Christianity, we are reminded, is a historical religion, taking its rise from a definite historical character, and finding its inspiration and power in the personal relation of men to Jesus. One who becomes a disciple of Jesus is constrained to value the world in which he lives in a Christian fashion. These valuations,

¹ *Outline of Christian Theology*, p. 10.

due to the influence of Jesus upon human consciousness, constitute the material out of which the theologian may build his system. Thus the Ritschlian holds that the final test to be put upon a religious conviction is its positive place in a system of values due to the influence of Jesus.

These ideals of Frank and of Ritschl have had widespread influence, and to a greater or less degree dominate a large amount of the theological work of today. They are, however, open to objection from two sides. On the one hand, they seem too irresponsibly subjective; on the other hand too narrowly dogmatic. The older theology assumed that its doctrines are based upon the objective revelation of God. To abandon this objective test and to draw the material for theology frankly from human experience seems to men educated in the older ideal to promise nothing but a chaos of irresponsible religious opinions. On the other hand, men whose spirit is determined by the modern ideal of research ask by what right a given type of religious experience can be isolated from all other experience as the norm by which to test doctrinal deliverances; or what warrant we have for assuming that the convictions of a man who submits himself exclusively to the influence of Jesus are more trustworthy than are those of the man who admits a wider range of historical influence into his thinking. Suggestive as have been the attempts of these theologians of "Christian experience," criticism is showing that it is becoming more and more difficult to justify the isolation of the norms, by which they propose to determine what we shall or shall not admit into a doctrinal system. The investigations of the psychology of religion seem to show that what have been regarded as typical elements of Christian experience are paralleled in other religions. To decide which of the various kinds of "regenerate" consciousness is to be selected as the norm by which to determine religious "truth" is becoming daily more difficult in the light of the scientific study of religions.² The Ritschlian norm is difficult to apply since the progress of New Testament scholarship has made it evident that Christian faith has at no time, not even in its earliest days, been formulated so exclusively under the influence of Jesus as is demanded by the Ritschlian ideal.

² E. g., such a book as James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*, while recognizing the genuineness of the sort of experience to which the Christian theologian appeals, accepts the experiences of men of other religions as just as genuine.

The "secularization" of Christian faith which Harnack finds so conspicuous a feature of post-apostolic days can be traced to some extent in the New Testament writings themselves.

It thus becomes evident that such an isolation of the field of systematic theology as seemed possible when Frank and Ritschl began their fruitful inquiries is not tenable. We are thrown back upon that bewildering "anywhere," which, however rich it may be in material, yet fails to suggest any definite method of dealing with this material. It is characteristic of much theological discussion today that this broader view of the field from which theological doctrines may be drawn is more or less frankly adopted without any adequate appreciation of what is logically involved in the change of view. As a rule, even men who have been led by present-day biblical scholarship to see the impossibility of applying the biblical norm with anything like the rigidity of former days nevertheless feel it necessary to attempt to retain the conception of an "absolute" or "final" theology which was the natural concomitant of the authority method, but which is fundamentally inconsistent with inductive procedure. While recognizing historically that religious ideas and rites change with the changing needs of man, a theologian may still feel that his central task should be the defense and exposition of at least the "essentials" of the "faith once delivered" rather than the thorough-going adoption of the inductive method.³ Accordingly, the primary task must be to isolate these essentials and to withdraw them from the dissolvent of criticism, in order that they may constitute a canon by which to test doctrinal deliverances. Only if such a norm can be established (so the argument runs) can we have a "dogmatic" theology. If we are to have the truth of God rather than the opinion of men, we must insist on some superempirical test of human opinion. In the place of the former test of scripturalness, we may put the revelation expressed in the New Testament faith;⁴ or we may employ a Christocentric ideal, according to which the revelation in Christ is normative.⁵

³ This is made evident in most of the adverse criticisms which are passed upon the work of the *religionsgeschichtliche* school. See, e. g., Hunziger, *Probleme und Aufgabe der gegenwärtigen systematischen Theologie* (Leipzig, 1909); and H. R. Mackintosh, "Does the Historical Study of Religions Yield a Dogmatic Theology?" *American Journal of Theology*, October, 1909.

⁴ This would seem to be the ideal of Kaehler.

⁵ E. g., the Ritschlian school in general, W. N. Clarke and Forsythe.

The spontaneous positive response of practical faith to such suggestions often conceals the scientific difficulty involved. That difficulty may be stated as follows: If it be essential to anchor theological conclusions to some absolute standard, the primary task is to determine what that absolute standard is. In the realm of human experience, all is relative. The standard, therefore, must come from some source other than ordinary human experience. The special inspiration of elect men, and the divine nature of Christ are usually cited to guarantee the right of their deliverances to form the norm for religious thinking. But from the point of view of scientific exposition (and systematic theology must meet the scientific demand) the validity of a conclusion depends not upon its withdrawal from criticism,⁶ but upon its ability to answer the demands of empirical testing at any time. In other words, the very notion of an absolute standard which shall take the place of empirical testing is so out of harmony with the present method of science, that a system which avowedly seeks such a basis for its doctrines is *ipso facto* under suspicion. To the man of really scientific temper, it makes little difference whether theology defer to the pope or to the Bible or to a superhuman Christ or to certain *Heilstatsachen* or to a religious a priori as the ultimate court of appeal. So long as any *absolutum* whatever is erected as an exception to the "natural" order, the theologian will seem like an advocate rather than an investigator. A theology which thus attempts to isolate a supernatural norm must frankly recognize that its task is simply the practical one of expounding the beliefs of those who acknowledge certain presuppositions. Just as Catholic theology will make its appeal only to those who hold the Catholic belief in ecclesiastical authority, so the various forms of Protestant theology of this type must presuppose acceptance of a larger or smaller portion of the ideal of authority. That such theologies will continue to be written is certain; and from the point of view of social psychology they will probably at present "function" more successfully than more thoroughgoing treatises. For the vast majority of religious people are educated by the church to accept as axiomatic the presupposition of a superempirical revelation which shall constitute the norm of right religious thinking.

⁶ For example, the purpose of strict Ritschians is to discover for religious faith a basis which cannot be affected by criticism.

But theology of this type, in so far as it departs from Catholicism represents a vanishing confidence rather than an increasing faith. The authority-ideal is strongest when its scope is greatest. The theology which appeals to an entire Bible looks with pity, if not with contempt, upon a theology which takes only a *part* of the Bible as a standard. To admit that the eschatology of the New Testament is not an abiding element in Christian theology means to ask why any of the New Testament should be regarded as absolute. To grant human limitations to the consciousness of Jesus seems to reduce to very low terms the superempirical residuum on which theology is to build. The modifications which have been compelled by the historical study of the Bible must to one who retains the authority-ideal appear as "concessions" rather than as positive contributions. "*Even if* we must admit them to be true, we *may still* anchor our faith to this rock, which criticism *has not yet* touched," is practically the message of many a book today. So long as criticism is feared, or is viewed primarily as a dissolvent, rather than welcomed as a positive factor in the construction of theology, the theologian who unceremoniously puts the critic out of doors has an advantage. He can say what he really wants to; while the theologian who entertains the critic as a companion must be most diplomatic in his utterances, and must give up to his guest space which his more dogmatic colleague can claim for himself.

Is it, then, necessary for theology to stand or fall with the acknowledgment of an absolute norm? If the empirical ideal be espoused, must there be an end of systematic theology? There can be no doubt that this would mean an end of theology as a system of unchangeable doctrines. No science for a moment asserts its doctrines to be final. Theology, on the contrary, has in the past assumed that its content, in essentials, must always be held as true. *In ipsa item catholica ecclesia magnopere curandum est, ut id teneamus, quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est.* To this day it seems to many Christian thinkers that a change of theological belief is inconsistent with a true faith. If a doctrine needs to be revised, the inference is that it was false in its older form; and a true faith cannot grow out of falsehood.

But the history of theological thought shows that as a matter of fact

there is not, and never has been, any such static body of doctrine. Even when all the influence of tradition and religious sentiment is on the side of unchanging dogma, the change comes. A doctrine so far removed from empirical tests and so sacredly guarded as that of the Trinity has a history which includes an interesting variety of interpretation. While every branch of the church has been appealing to the same New Testament as the basis for true theology, diversity of opinion so sharp as to lead to religious warfare has marked the history of Christendom.

These changes and diversities are a source of perplexity to theologians so long as the rigid distinction between "true" and "false" is retained. But the general adoption of the historical method, supplemented by the comparatively new point of view of social psychology, now furnishes a principle of explanation which, if followed up, may lead to genuinely constructive results. The historian explains the form and content of religious beliefs by seeking to relate them to the vital problems and ideas which were current in the age in which the convictions took vigorous form. For example, it is now a commonplace that the idea of God during the period covered by the Old Testament literature underwent striking changes, and that these changes can be accounted for by the varying national experience of Israel. The vital needs and the stock of ideas current in the life of a nomadic people were very different from the needs and ideas of a people conscious of its place among empire-seeking nations. A scientific account of the theology of the Old Testament must interpret its doctrines in relation to the problems confronting the makers of religious belief. The key to a proper understanding of doctrine is to be found in a correct apprehension of the problems which demanded solution. The value of a given theology consists in the success with which it furnishes a solution to the historical problems which it faced. But no form of doctrine is regarded by the historian as final or absolute. Those who demand an "absolute" theology are perfectly right in their contention that the historical method cannot yield it.

If we are led by the historian and psychologist to see that the glory and strength of any given theology is to be found in the fact that it successfully answered certain vital problems so that men were

enabled to face the supreme tasks of life with courage and efficiency, may it not be that we have as a result of a study of the history of religious belief the clue to the task of systematic theology? Should not the theologian adopt an inductive method of ascertaining what beliefs ought to be held today by those who are to gain from their religious convictions strength and courage for the supreme tasks of modern life? If, by analyzing the historical conditions underlying the formulation of religious belief in the past, we understand its significance, would not an equally thorough analysis of the conditions of modern life suggest the form of religious belief which would contribute most powerfully to life's victory in our day?

This suggestion gains weight when we observe that even the theologians who preserve the authority-ideal are really concerned to meet the needs of the day. As has been said, the utmost efforts of ecclesiastical conformists have not been able to prevent changes in doctrine. Just now we are seeing a gratifying output of publications which seek to meet squarely the needs of the "modern man." But so long as the authority-ideal is held, these modifications of doctrine, as has been indicated, seem like concessions more or less unwillingly granted rather than as positive achievements in which we may glory. When the discovery of radium compels a radical revision of chemical theory, the change is announced as a positive contribution. But when the theory of evolution compels theology to revise the doctrine of creation, the revision is so slowly and reluctantly made that it appears for a long time as a partial defeat rather than as a triumph of theological thinking. The adoption of the point of view inculcated by historical study should make it possible for the theologian to use the elements which enter into a changed situation in such a way as to make the new theology seem truer to the facts, and therefore better, than the old. One who has traced the growth of the Nicene theology under the stress of the development of the Christian consciousness from a Hebrew to a Greek point of view ought to be able to see in this development something other than a "corruption" of the original gospel. The Nicene theology represents a genuine religious triumph. And if, in the analysis of the modern situation, it should be found that today a different Christology from that of Athanasius is needed, the departure from this ancient

doctrine should be shown to be a positive contribution to the development of a more efficient theology rather than a negation of the faith. Instead of attempting to reproduce the doctrines of a past era, however glorious they may have been, theology will rather attempt to set forth what ought to be the faith of one who, recognizing his debt to the history which has produced him, yet strives to give to the problems of the present the solution which is imperative if faith is to be triumphant. It is the faith which ought to be held by saints today rather than the faith once delivered to the saints of old which will constitute the content of a scientific theology. As will be evident from the following discussion, the beliefs which a man "ought" to hold are not to be determined by erecting over the conscience and intellect some external authority to which one is bound to give allegiance. The actual exigencies of human life will themselves exercise persuasive power. In a similar way the formulator of ethical theory sets forth what men "ought" to believe about human conduct. But the moral valuation is to be referred to the immanent conditions of successful life, and from this point of view is an analysis of what actually exists rather than—as has sometimes been erroneously argued—the portrayal of what is not, but which ought to be. Just as the ethicist draws his conclusions from an appreciation of the environment in which human interests seek satisfaction, so the theologian must have primary regard for the concrete conditions under which religious aspirations seek expression.

If, now, we may indicate the steps to be taken in order to arrive at the goal which has been indicated, there seem to be four main tasks to be accomplished in the scientific formulation of the religious beliefs which ought to be held by men today. These four tasks are: (1) the historical understanding of the growth and significance of the religious ideals which constitute our social inheritance; (2) the analysis of present religious needs; (3) the interpretation of these needs in such a way as to suggest religious convictions which shall be at the same time practically efficient and rationally defensible; and (4) the apologetic defense of the theological convictions reached. It is evident that these are not absolutely distinct tasks. The method which is employed in one will be used in all. The results obtained in one field will have their important bearing in the solution of prob-

lems in another. All are correlated to the one empirical task of discovering what ought to be the religious convictions of men today when the facts of human life in its total relationships are adequately understood. Brief suggestions as to what may be expected in carrying out such a programme as the above will be all that is permitted within the limits of this paper.

I. The historical task is already familiar to scholars. The methods and aims of historical investigation are coming to be as naturally and as universally accepted as are the methods and aims of any science. In brief, the purpose of the historian is to ascertain as exactly as possible the events of the past, and to show the character and movement of the forces which occasioned the aspirations, beliefs, and enterprises of humanity. The theologian will, therefore, endeavor to have a clear and accurate conception of the reasons for the rise and growth of fundamental ideas and institutions in the history of the religion which it is his especial task to interpret. This means, of course, that he will become acquainted with the significant religious problems of men in the past, and will understand how the solution of those problems gave rise to the theological doctrines which were evolved out of the situation. Important as is the history of the biblical period of religious thought, the post-biblical history must be followed with equal care. Especially indispensable is it to know the movements of the past century during which our modern world of activities and ideals has taken shape in the utterances of science and philosophy and literature. Such a fruitful distinction as that of Troeltsch, e. g., between Old Protestantism and New Protestantism,⁷ arises out of a historical appreciation of the recent past, and is of far more value to the theologian than are the conventional distinctions between sects and schools usually found in theological treatises. Nothing can take the place of this historical preparation for the constructive task. It is only by an acquaintance with the actual religious development of mankind that one can see just how theology is made. It is only thus that one gains a true knowledge of the elements which enter into positive religious convictions. It should be repeated, however, that this study of historical Christianity is not for the

⁷ *Protestantisches Christentum und Kirche in der Neuzeit. Kultur der Gegenwart*, Teil I, Abt. IV, pp. 253 ff.

purpose of making any one period of it normative for the rest. It is simply in order to discover the principles which govern the development of religious belief, so that in the pursuit of our own task of formulation, we may intelligently deal with the material at our disposal. Such a fundamental use of history involves no "entangling alliance." It is simply the recognition of the fact that stability in the development of human thought and endeavor requires us to know just the extent and the nature of our relation to the past out of which we have grown, and to appeal to that past with critical intelligence.

2. The second task is the analysis of the actual religious problems which confront men today. This analysis, it is true, is very generally undertaken by theologies of all types. But the purpose of it in the hands of a theologian who holds to the authority-ideal is that he may more efficiently bring the "gospel" or the "message of Christianity" to the "modern world." So long as one has in mind from the first the content of doctrine which is to be brought and defended, one cannot adopt the empirical method. The analysis of present life must be made for the purpose of deriving theological conclusions out of life itself. The question whether the solutions demanded by present problems do or do not correspond with the doctrine of some former age must not be allowed to dominate the situation. What the theologian is to discover is the sort of belief which men today can really *believe*, not how men may be brought to give assent to some belief formulated in the past. To be sure, it would be a violent procedure to act as if the present were discontinuous with the past; to start with the hypothesis that our conclusions must necessarily be at variance with the theories which have compelled men's approval in past generations. Indeed, one of the conspicuous traits of the empirical method of studying human life is the large and positive use which is made of the experiments and achievements of the race in the past. But it should never be forgotten that the theologian is dealing with the problems and convictions of his own day, and that these are his primary concern.

Here we may point to the parallel between this task and that of the student of social science for example. The latter finds a knowledge of the history of human thought indispensable to the intelligent formulation of social theory. But his own theory grows out of his analysis

of the facts of human life, not out of the necessity for preserving Comtism or Spencerism or Marxism as a norm for his conclusions. In the same way, the formulation of ethical theory is an inductive task. The history of human conduct of course supplies data from which conclusions are to be drawn; but no specific historical theory is presumed to be "authoritative." A scientific ethical doctrine must be derived from an understanding of life itself. The theologian will find data for his work in historic expressions of belief; but he will recognize that the acceptance of any fixed norm would constitute him a scholiast rather than a real contributor to scientific progress. The analysis of present religious conditions and problems, therefore, is undertaken for the positive purpose of formulating religious convictions which shall answer certain pertinent questions of the human spirit in our day rather than for the pedagogical end of making plausible a system of belief already formulated. Too much of the consideration given by theologians today to the conclusions of modern science is simply a superficial homiletical device by which a more or less transparent "harmonization" of theology and science is effected. To take the statement of a creed as a finished product and to compare this with a theory of science as a similar finished product in order that a way may be found by which neither may be absolutely denied, means that the theologian is engaged in logomachy rather than in the real work of formulating vital religious convictions.

There is no space to elaborate this point by citing illustrations at length. Let one read current treatments of the doctrine of sin, and one will see what confusion is due to the necessity of trying to include both the doctrines drawn from the traditional connection of sin with Adam and the conclusions which modern biology and psychology make imperative. A theology of the type which is advocated in this article would first ask the question whether the elements of the older doctrine of original sin have a place in modern consciousness. As a matter of fact, what is the source of moral distress among men today? What are the causes of moral maladjustment? The doctrine of sin must be developed by determining the facts and not by attempting to show that Paul's theory is the true one. If it be discovered that our modern civilization gives rise to a more corporate and impersonal

source of moral maladjustment, than was formerly the case, theology must abandon the individualistic point of view and do justice to the social facts which are making their potent moral appeal to men today.

Or again, just what is it in the life of men today which creates a longing to believe in God? This central problem of theology can never be fruitfully considered so long as the theologian is primarily concerned to defend an already-accepted doctrine. Too often the attempts to demonstrate the divine personality or fatherhood are undertaken without any previous inquiry whether the needs of our age will actually be satisfied by these conceptions of God. If it be true—as I believe it is—that the belief in God involves the conviction that the administration of the universe in which we live is concerned to make possible and to preserve our ideals of order, truth, and justice, then the theologian must ask how these ideals may be maintained. If men thought in terms of a patriarchal society, the fatherhood of God would perhaps be an adequate symbol for faith. But if, as is the case in modern life, the power of the home has given way to a more complex organization of society, those qualities which we today associate with fatherhood may not be adequate to the situation. The father may be sympathetic and comforting to those in misery; but he may be actually unable to do much to relieve it. The working-man today feels this defect as he observes the Christian church satisfied with a ministry of benevolent comfort, but unable to realize the worship of a God who should summon men to heroic efforts in the realm of social and industrial reorganization. The task of the theologian is thus a far more serious one than that of making plausible an already-given doctrine of the fatherhood of God. He must determine why men today need God, what ideals they feel should be maintained by a Power worthy of worship and devotion. Out of this actual appreciation of present needs must grow the elements of the doctrine of God.

The same principle applies to all the doctrines. The conception of salvation can be formulated only as one shall actually discover from what men need to be saved. The astonishing success of Christian Science is largely due to the fact that this movement has addressed itself to a genuine source of human distress and perplexity and has

shaped its theology so as directly to apply to the need.⁸ The religious devotion of men to the trades union or to the socialistic ideal is due to the same correlation of theory with actual need. If theology is to have a real place in life, it must grow out of an intelligent understanding of the profound needs of men, and must provide an efficient answer to the questionings which arise from these needs.

3. The successful prosecution of this second task already provides one with the data which are to enter into the positive construction of doctrine. If we know the real needs of men, the next undertaking is to meet those needs by organizing the available forces of the universe so as to provide the most satisfactory answer to the problems of life. If the approach to theology which has been suggested seems to offer unrestrained scope to the imagination, if it seems to be an irrational sort of pragmatism which would simply ask what it would be pleasant to believe and would then declare that to be theology, it should be noted that the historical preparation for the task will furnish a relentless guide. One who has scientifically studied the history of religion will have some idea of what is and what is not rationally possible in the construction of religious belief. Those theologies which have been due to uncontrolled imagination rather than to observance of fact prove their inefficiency when put to the test for any length of time. The theologian will therefore do precisely what any scientific investigator does. He will use his constructive imagination while always insisting upon the necessity for verification by appeal to the facts. The history of philosophy shows how possible it is to construct theories concerning ultimate realities while at the same time insisting that speculation shall be controlled by the facts. It is, of course, true that no philosophical or theological theory is susceptible of a conclusive mathematical demonstration. But this is equally true of most theories in the realm of natural science. The most that is expected is an adequate working-hypothesis, on the basis of which the experiment of life may be successfully prosecuted until a better view of things shall be achieved. Theology will thus, in the light of its preliminary analysis of the needs

⁸ We are not here commanding the doctrinaire method by which the dogmas of Christian Science are derived and defended. But if so vulnerable a theology can gain a hearing when it correlates itself to a real human problem, ought not a really scientific attempt at such correlation to win the hearty interest and allegiance of men?

of humanity, suggest tenable religious interpretations of the facts which surround us, so that life may legitimately be reinforced by the optimism and courage which comes from a successful attempt to reach out for help from the Most High. Recent experiments in psychotherapy illustrate the way in which theology may be correlated to human needs in such a way as to make full use of scientific achievements. If the moral and religious problems due to our modern social and industrial life were to receive a similar scientific attention, it might be found possible to formulate a living theology definitely correlated to the social situation. The power of such a theology is strikingly illustrated in the messages of the prophets of Israel. The theologian, if he be a man of religious imagination and be well-grounded in the history and psychology of religion, ought to be the formulator of religious convictions around which men would rally and in the strength of which they would triumphantly overcome the evils of life. Such a theology would be the expression of belief in the living God of present power.

At this point the question naturally arises whether this method of analyzing the social situation furnishes so distinctive a task that we can distinguish systematic theology from philosophy or ethics. In a sense, the field of theology is identical with that of the humanistic sciences. When we are dealing with the living problems of humanity, it is not possible so to parcel off the territory that the various branches of inquiry shall be absolutely distinct. Economics, political science, sociology, ethics, and philosophy today are all dealing with the general field of human interests. The differentiation of these sciences is to be found, not in objective division of territory, but rather in the specific purpose which is dominant in the mind of the investigator. The theologian is also dealing with human life in its broad aspects. But he is pre-eminently concerned to interpret life with reference to the religious beliefs which should be legitimately available to help men in the great experiment of existence. He is convinced that religious convictions have an important part to play in a well-rounded development of personal and social experience, and he is concerned so to understand the nature and function of these beliefs that he may be able to increase the efficiency of those institutions and instruments by which the wholesome religious life of men is to be pro-

moted. The philosopher is likely to be interested more or less exclusively in the scientific aspects of his analysis. The investigator in the field of social phenomena may be interested primarily in the scientific aspects of sociology; or he may be supremely concerned to help in working out the practical problems of human society. The theologian's fundamental interest is in religious interpretation. The aim of his work is to indicate what religious convictions men ought to hold if they are to grasp the supreme significance of life. This practical interest of the theologian will lead him to adopt a point of view which is not adequately represented by any other realm of scholarship. One of the constant and insistent elements in human thought is the need of asking and answering the questions concerning our relation to the Power which brought us into existence and which controls the destinies of life. Any analysis of the social situation, if it omits this pressing question, or if it treats it only in a descriptive fashion, will fail to do justice to the deeper interests of mankind. To survey the field in such a way as to suggest right beliefs concerning God, the soul, and human destiny is an undertaking the importance of which is evident.

Again, it may be asked what guarantee there is that the outcome of such an empirical investigation as has been indicated will be a Christian theology. There is, of course, no such guarantee; nor does the scientific theologian wish it. If there be any form of faith which is actually better adapted to bring to expression the vital realities with which religion deals, the theologian should be the first to discover it. In so far as religious belief which has been inherited from the past is really adequate to the needs of the present, it of course needs no revision. But the theologian should be equipped with a scientific method of investigation which will enable him to judge whether a given type of theology is actually suited to enlist the most worthy aspirations of men in a given age and environment. Any significant revision of belief can come in no formal or superficial fashion. The specialized theories of academic scholars frequently leave no impress on history. Only those elements of modernism which actually become social forces will enter into a virile theology. Now the Western World has embodied the fundamental conceptions of Christianity in its language, its institutions, and its ideals. Religious problems

are naturally formulated in terms of our Christian inheritance. Of course, if it should appear that the ideals of modern science are absolutely incompatible with Christian faith; if there were such a contradiction between them that it were necessary to take one side to the exclusion of the other, the method here adopted would demand the formulation of religious beliefs which would incorporate the scientific point of view. But a study of the life of Jesus reveals the fact that his sensitiveness to concrete reality and his interest in the practical welfare of men was quite as keen as that of modern science. A theology which invokes his spirit need not anticipate any need of a divorce from the scientific ideal. The evolution of original messianic faith into the later types of theology shows the adaptability of Christianity to changing situations. Only if Christianity should prove itself actually unable to satisfy the religious needs of men would the theologian be compelled to abandon it; and in my opinion Christianity is fundamentally in sympathy with the scientific spirit. Indeed, the incomparable insight of Jesus into the religious needs of men and the extraordinary power of his character and of his teachings to lead men to satisfactory and efficient religious beliefs will actually play a far larger part in the construction of theology than might be inferred by one unacquainted with the New Testament. A scientific study of religion must recognize in Jesus the most significant source of religious faith in all human history. One who really knows Jesus has no fear lest the religion which he inspires may be outgrown. Thus while a scientific method in theology cannot presuppose the truth of Christianity, an anti-Christian theology—in the Western world, at least—is almost certain to betray an unscientific temper.

4. The apologetic defense of the conclusions reached is an essential branch of any theology. Our method of defense, however, is dictated by the ideal which has been outlined. The authority-ideal finds the guarantee of the truth of theological convictions in an extraneous source. It is because they may be referred to some authoritative source that they are valid. Apologetics must therefore vindicate the right of appeal to this absolute norm. The apologetic of an empirical theology must be of precisely the same character as the apologetic for any scientific working-hypothesis. That is, theory must be shown to be justified by the facts. It must be susceptible

of verification by repeated experiment. It must be seen to fit in with the conclusions of other sciences. It must commend itself by the test of its fruits. Assuming that theology declares that Christian religious beliefs ought to be held, apologetics must show that this Christian interpretation of life in the first place is derived from a truthful and comprehensive analysis of the facts which enter into life, and in the second place fits in with the generally established conclusions of men concerning the facts of the universe. If in the formulation of his system the theologian has pursued the empirical method above outlined, he need not fear especial difficulty in defending it. His main task will be to show the partial and inadequate character of any philosophy of life which omits a consideration of the religious needs of man; and to show the superiority of Christian doctrines over any rival religious theories. Having established the normal and legitimate character of the aspirations which lead man to try to penetrate behind the surface of events for communion with the Power which orders and controls the universe, apologetics has simply to show that the Christian answer to this yearning of man both conforms to the requirements of scientific honesty and most successfully promotes the highest type of human life.

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